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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to discuss one promising and proven way some colleges of education (COEs) have attempted to develop academic climate and facilitate graduate student research activity. The focus is on the role of student-organized internal research conferences in the transformation of student to social scientist. The benefits these internal conferences offer to both students and faculty in particular and COEs in general are discussed. To accomplish this objective and to illustrate the impact internal research conferences can have on the scholarly development of graduate students, the researchers' experiences as participants in such conferences are presented as case studies, offering the views of a current student and a former student turned faculty member. (Author/SLD)

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Running head: EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH EXCHANGES

Student-Organized College of Education "Educational Research Exchanges" from the Student and Former Student Perspective

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Abstract

The purpose of the present article is to discuss one promising (and proven) way some Colleges of Education (COEs) have attempted to develop academic climate and facilitate graduate student research activity. Specifically, we address the role of student-organized internal research conferences in the transformation of student to social scientist. We attempt to explicate the benefits these internal conferences offer to both students and faculty in particular and COEs in general. To accomplish this objective and to illustrate the impact internal research conferences can have on the scholarly development of graduate students, we have chosen to present our experiences as two ERE participants, as case studies of ourselves. In doing so, we present views of a current student and a former student turned faculty member.

Student-Organized College of Education "Educational Research Exchanges" from the Student and Former Student Perspective

The alchemical transformation of a graduate student into social scientist is one of the challenges of a college of education (COE). While the goal of any COE is to produce competent professionals, with skills and experience necessary to excel in their fields, a further goal at the graduate level is to turn out researchers that are capable of conducting independent research, thereby adding to the body of knowledge. In other disciplines, especially the "harder" sciences, students often seem to come pre-wired with the interests and aptitudes relevant to conducting research. In the field of education, however, students would often rather work with people than numbers. It is not uncommon to observe graduate students engaging in cringing and shunning when the topic of conversation turns to statistical analysis or research design. The challenge of the COE, department, division or individual faculty member is to harness most students' curiosity while reining in their apprehension.

There are many ways that COEs, and departments within COEs, seek to foster and develop research interest and activity among their graduate students. Of course, the degree that a COE pursues this goal is likely directly proportional to the degree that the COE, and its faculty, view research as worthy endeavor. As evidenced by social cognitive views of learning, modeling and social persuasion are powerful influences on behavior. Academic climate, or lack thereof, can impact graduate students' perspectives and valuing of research.

This purpose of the present article is to discuss one promising (and proven) way some COEs have attempted to develop academic climate and facilitate graduate student research activity. Specifically, we will address the role of student-organized internal research conferences in the transformation of student to social scientist (herein called Educational Research

Exchanges, or EREs, due to the name used by some COEs). We hope to explicate the benefits EREs offer to both students and faculty in particular and COEs in general. To accomplish this objective and to illustrate the impact ERE events can have on the scholarly development of graduate students, we have chosen to present our experiences as two ERE participants, as case studies of ourselves. In doing so, we present views of a current student (first author) and a former student (second author) turned faculty member.

As part our discussion, we also present results from a brief survey that was sent to COE Deans of Education at leading research universities in the United States. The survey was intended to assess the degree COEs support and encourage research among their graduate students, and whether they sponsor EREs as part of that process. Surveys were sent to the Deans of 30 universities with national research reputations along with a conference program from a past ERE enclosed. The following five questions were asked: (1) Do departments or the college at your university help defray travel expenses for students presenting research papers at national conferences? (2) Are students formally required by policies within your College to present research papers at regional or national conferences as part of their degree program? (3) Does your college or your university host an annual informal conference of any kind at which graduate student present research papers? (4) If "yes", is there a keynote speaker at this conference? (5) If "yes", is the conference scheduled as a paper presentation practice of some kind prior to some other formal conference, such as one of the regional educational research associations? Fourteen universities responded and are listed in Table 1 along with survey results. We comment on these results at various points in our discussion.

Insert Table 1 About Here

The Purpose and Goal of the ERE

As a result of volunteering to help with the ERE at Texas A&M University during my (first author) first year in a doctoral program, I was asked to develop an evaluation to help justify to the Dean of the College of Education that the ERE was worth the financial investment. Because I had never attended the ERE or any conference like it, I took the opportunity to interview several faculty and students about what they thought were the benefits and goals of the ERE. I will use the results of my interviews and conference evaluation to structure my discussion.

Creating an Environment Honoring Research

Foremost among the messages sent by the time, money, and energy spent on conducting a research exchange is that research is important and valued by the College as a whole. Students are often unaware of how much time faculty are required to spend on their own research activities, much less about the specific research interests of faculty members that are not directly involved in their program of study. A university that is dedicated to research activity should be eager to provide a venue for the students and faculty members across departments within the college to exchange and present their research products. This exchange of ideas is critical to developing academic climate.

Education is a diverse field with diverse areas of expertise and interest. One of the ongoing goals of the ERE at Texas A&M University is to broaden the participation beyond the Department of Educational Psychology, where the conference started. This goal has been met with increasing degrees of success over the last six years. The 2001 ERE saw the most diverse

sampling of participants so far. I believe this was due in part to the fact that Distinguished Research Fellows, Deans, and other faculty members were recruited to serve as chairs for sessions. The presence and participation of these faculty members provided a layer of realism to the conference, as well as endorsing the philosophy that research and the scholarly exchange of ideas is an integral part of the academic life.

It should be noted at this point that Texas A&M's ERE is student-organized and student-driven. The student orientation has been critical to the success of the ERE, and has promoted increased student participation. However, students benefit from mentors, and therefore faculty support is just as critical to ERE success. Faculty participation brings legitimacy and professionalism to the internal conference. We propose that the ERE best functions as the synergistic interchange between students and faculty, a point discussed below. Academic climate stems from such synergy.

As part of my evaluation of the ERE, several statements on the conference evaluation form were directed at assessing the contribution of the ERE to improving the academic environment and providing a venue for raising intra-college awareness of research activities and expertise. The evaluative statements were: (a) This conference contributes to creating an academic community at TAMU where research is valued and encouraged, (b) Faculty encouraged participation in the conference, (c) This conference contributes to the academic stature of the College of Education, and (d) I believe this conference enhances the relationship between departments in the College of Education. All of these statements consistently received responses of 4 or 5 on a 5-point Likert-type scale with the exception of statement (d). This statement received a few 3 (Neutral) responses and one 2 (Disagree) response.

While organizing the ERE this year, I decided to group presentations together by topic, which resulted in departmental presentations falling together. However, the feedback I got from the participants was that they would have enjoyed the conference more if the sessions had been more diverse. Participants and attendees did not come to the conference to just remain within their field of study, but wanted more exposure to what was happening in other areas. This speaks to the intellectual curiosity that is that is fostered by a positive academic climate.

Improving Faculty/Student Relationships

When surveying faculty members about the benefits of the ERE, they each suggested that one of the benefits for them was the opportunity to interact with students in a more collegial environment. Apparently, faculty members actually like students and enjoy getting to know them and talking to them. An ERE provides the chance for students to present on an equal footing with professors. Everyone presents their work for both the edification of their peers and at the risk of scrutiny. Nevertheless, the supportive environment of an in-house research exchange diminishes the risk and amplifies the benefit of sharing work and ideas with one another.

In order to assess the ERE's success at meeting this goal, the following statements were presented on the evaluation: (a) The conference allowed students and faculty members to share research and exchange ideas in a collegial environment, and (b) The conference provided the opportunity for faculty members and students to improve social relationships. Conference participants again rated these questions highly, primarily 4's and 5's. Question (b) received a higher rating this year than in the previous year, when I first wrote the evaluation. I believe this was due to the increase in faculty presence and participation as fellow presenters. If the faculty does not demonstrate the importance of conducting and disseminating research work products,

they cannot expect students to embrace this mindset. On the other hand, enthusiasm is as contagious as apathy, if not more so.

Offering a Valuable Learning Experience

The ERE at Texas A&M was originally conceived in 1996 to provide graduate students in Educational Psychology with the opportunity to practice presenting papers and symposia that were going to be subsequently presented at other regional and national conferences. It continues to meet this goal for students as well as for faculty. The element of practice is an important one and requires that we keep the exchange small and informal enough so that presentation at the exchange does not preclude presentation at another conference. If participants had to choose between presenting at a local conference versus a regional or national one, the result would likely be fewer participants or the presentation of work that was not ready for another level or presentation. By keeping the ERE at the level of in-house exchange, the attendees are treated to presentations that they might not otherwise have had the opportunity to see, and presenters are given the opportunity to hone their presentation skills. While nine of the universities responding to the survey reported that they do offer a research exchange at the college or university level, only one, University of Wisconsin-Madison, stated that this conference is used as practice for other conferences, specifically for AERA.

However, as the Texas A&M ERE has expanded in scope over the last six years, it has needed to offer more than just a practice session for the novice presenter in order to attract more attendees and participants. To this end, each year the ERE has invited a keynote speaker to present on their own research activities. In the past few years, it has become to the tradition to invite a former student, a somewhat recent graduate, to be the keynote speaker. The challenge is to find a speaker who is active in research that would be relevant and of interest to the members

of the entire COE; of course, they also have to be able to deliver a decent speech. Finding an individual who meets all these criteria is no small task. It requires one to think about what unites the individuals in the COE, which is rigorous study and the application of that study to the learning, growth, development, change, and potential of human beings, with all of their idiosyncrasies. A lot can and does fit under that umbrella.

Time is precious as a student and as a faculty member. No one has the time to waste an entire day. As program chair, it was important for me that those who attended felt that their time had been well spent. The statements that evaluated this aspect of the ERE were: (a) This conference was valuable to me as a learning experience, (b) I would encourage others in my program to participate in this conference, and (c) This conference has been valuable to me as a professional development experience. I was gratified that all but two faculty members gave these questions the highest rating. All students, but one, gave these questions rankings of 4 or 5. These ratings speak to the fact that everyone can use a little practice now and then, and teachers still learn from students and one another.

The ERE is designed to honor and encourage research activity, build relationships and awareness of research activity throughout the COE, to provide a learning opportunity for the attendees and presenters and to help foster a united identity as scientist in the field of education. I believe EREs offer a unique opportunity for any COE to provide an environment for these goals to take root.

Implosion and Demystification: A Student's Perspective

In effort to illustrate the possible impact of an ERE, I (first author) present now my own experiences as a graduate student and ERE participant. I am currently in my second year of doctoral study in Counseling Psychology at Texas A&M University. This year, I served as chair

for the Sixth Annual College of Education Educational Research Exchange. This information is surprising, if you know my history at all. After obtaining a degree in English and working in various post-liberal-arts-bachelor-degree jobs, I sought out a non-thesis master's degree that would equip me to be licensed as a therapist, which I am. When I first read the information sent to me about Texas A&M, I almost threw it away because of the research and presentation requirements that were so prominent in the application literature. Ill equipped is the kindest way I can describe how I felt when I thought about having to meet those requirements. During the interview process, I had to ask what a research team was and was sure that this would preclude my selection. The only reassurance I received was the acknowledgement that, while the requirements might seem a bit intimidating, the faculty was committed to helping us meet them.

In psychology, implosion is a term used to describe a behavioral technique where a client with a specific fear or phobia experiences an emersion-like exposure to the object of their fear and is taught to relax and cope with the experience. For example, a person who is afraid of crowds might be taken to Times Square on New Year's Eve. Or, to extend the metaphor to my own experience, a graduate student afraid of statistics is encouraged to present a methodology paper at a regional conference. Why would such a student accept this challenge? It is because this type of activity is required by my program to be completed within the first two years of study.

While all universities responding to survey devote money to help students defray the cost of conference travel, to my surprise, only one of the fourteen responding schools stated that they require students to present research papers as part of their degree plan. About half acknowledged through comments that this is type of professional activity is strongly encouraged or expected, especially of doctoral students. One school stated that encouraging research presentation results

in 78% of full-time doctoral students making research presentations. That is a pretty good number, but it would be 100% if it were a requirement. I will confess that if I could have avoided it, I would have avoided it, mostly out of fear and inexperience.

As it happens, within five months of the beginning of my study, I was preparing to present my first methodology paper at a regional conference. Because I had never attended such a conference before, I had no idea what would be the conditions of the presentation or expectations of the audience. Fortunately, the COE at Texas A&M hosts an informal research exchange (as described above) early in the Spring before most regional or national conferences (e.g., Southwest Educational Research Association [SERA], American Educational Research Association [AERA], National Council on Measurement in Education [NCME], Southwest Psychological Association, National Association of School Psychologists) so that students can gain valuable experience practicing their presentations, as well as hearing faculty members present their own work. My experience presenting at the ERE set up a positive initial presentation experience at SERA, which fed a motivation to present again at SERA, NCME, and AERA annual conferences. The ERE provided an effective tool for reducing my fear and anxiety about presenting for the first time, an environment to interact with faculty members in a collegial atmosphere, and an opportunity to expand my knowledge of research activity throughout the COE. I was eager to chair this year's conference and pass on this experience to other students.

The Evolution of Student to Scholar: A Former Student's (and Current Faculty Member's) Perspective

As a faculty member in the College of Education at the University of North Texas, I (second author) am confronted almost daily with the ideal of educating graduate students to value and utilize research in their fields. The fact that I teach graduate-level research,

measurement, and statistic courses makes my ideal particularly relevant to the current discussion, as I also hope to foster technically competent researchers who can both conduct their own research and consume and critique the research of others. As part of this goal, I now present my perspective of the ERE, as both a former student who participated in an ERE and as current faculty who has helped initiate an ERE at the University of North Texas as a result of my participation as a student.

Untapped Expertise

My doctoral work was completed in the Department of Educational Psychology at Texas A&M University, and as such I was able to participate in the ERE described above. Much like the first author's experience, I approached my doctoral work with little interest in research activity; I too selected a non-thesis Master's degree in clinical psychology en route to become a therapist. With private practice as my goal, I sought the doctorate in Educational Psychology to bolster my credentials.

I sought to become involved in research, not out of great desire, but out of an expectation that doctoral students were supposed to do that sort of thing. Fortunately, I was encouraged by faculty members to write quality papers as part of my courses, and present those papers at conferences. Also fortunately for me, I was able to "ease in" to the presentation experience with the in-house ERE.

I found my experiences with the ERE and later regional conferences quite empowering. Much to my surprise, I realized that the chasm between my self-perceived expertise and that of other work presented at the conferences was not nearly as large as I had thought. I found that my work was valuable, at least to some, and consequently I found that I had a capacity for research and statistics that was previously unrecognized. My experiences led not only to a shift in

emphasis in my doctoral coursework, but also in my career as I decided to pursue an academic position.

Mentorship: A Two-Way Street

Key to the quality of a graduate program is the ability of the faculty to mentor students. Students are, in my view, the most valuable asset a department or college has, and therefore, their development as scholars should be a priority. The ERE provides a unique venue for this mentorship to occur. Furthermore, due to the in-house nature of an ERE, the mentorship process can become a two-way street.

From the student perspective, it can be incredibly empowering to present your work side by side with faculty members you have respected and from whom you have taken classes. Often the very work you are presenting has been generated, in some form, from your coursework or other interaction with faculty. Important for the academic climate of the COE, this type of research sharing can be (and should be, in my view) explicitly facilitated by faculty. I am assuming, of course, that the faculty values this type of mentoring relationship with students. Mentoring student research demands a measure of time, effort, and perhaps some patience.

However, I view the mentoring relationship as beneficial to faculty as well, at least for faculty willing to authentically engage in the process. The intellectual interchange of ideas as students pursue their research can be enriching for faculty and necessitates that the faculty stay on top of their own research agendas and remain current in the field. Again, the ERE can provide an excellent venue for this interchange. Furthermore, the professional mentoring that occurs during the development of a research study is probably more important than the actual ERE presentations. What the ERE does, however, is provide an attainable goal for the student, particularly for those students without great aspiration to participate in regional or national

conferences. Additionally, an ERE provides faculty a specific event around which to develop and foster these mentoring relationships.

Students as Developing Scholars

From the faculty perspective, I believe it is critical that faculty continually remind themselves that our students are developing scholars. Most fields in education have some form of the scientist-practitioner model in their educational philosophies. While many programs would place emphasis on the practitioner portion of this model, few would deny the critical role of research in their field and the ability of their professionals to remain engaged in current research as consumers.

The development of a scholar is indeed a process, which may not take a predictable path. It may be difficult to predict the career trajectories of our students. And, our students undoubtedly must undergo a transformation as they develop their research skills. A problem in this scholarly development lies with the fact that a void exists between what most students perceive as their own capabilities and the level they perceive as necessary to be "researchers." The ERE is tailor-made to fill this void. It provides a stepping stone experience where graduate students can flex their presentation muscles, receive valuable feedback, observe others (including faculty) presenting, and practice for more formal regional or national conferences.

Appreciation of Quality Research

Of course, we do not wish that our students remain novices. Instead, we typically hope that our students will become respected professionals in their fields, capable of independent inquiry and appreciative of quality research. When faculty and graduate students collaborate on joint projects, or when they present side by side in an ERE, we hope that our students are gaining

appreciation of the research process. We hope they are developing their own insight into the field. Furthermore, we hope they are developing quality research skills.

Professionals without a research foundation must rely on the interpretations of others or at least accept the interpretations of authors without risk of critique. This is not the empowered professional most fields of study would envision. Rather, the scholar, the scientist-practitioner, or even the practitioner-scientist must develop knowledge and appreciation of quality research. Participation in an ERE can help develop this expectation, particularly via faculty mentorship and critique in a non-threatening context.

It is primarily for this purpose that I sought to initiate an ERE at my current institution, the University of North Texas. Having experienced participation in an ERE first-hand as a graduate student, I was aware of the potential benefits to students. Having now assumed a faculty role, I became acutely aware of the benefit such an event could have for faculty (an outcome I was obliviously unaware of as a student). Specifically, I view the ERE as a "good excuse" to conduct research and expect my students to conduct research. I can use the ERE as a focus point at which class products can receive recognition and credit beyond the course. Graduate students, like faculty, are typically eager to gain additional lines on their vitaes! Furthermore, the ERE provides a tangible target toward which to collaborate on a project. I have found that my students are considerably more eager to work on research activities when they can envision a point at which they will have to stand before their peers and share their findings.

Fortunately for my COE, our Dean agreed to financially support this idea. After forming a committee of graduate students and planning for some time, we recently held our first annual Educational Research Exchange. (I should note that forming this committee was rather easy, which speaks to the desire of many graduate students to be involved in research and the

perceived value of an event such as the ERE.) The conference was a wonderful success. Many faculty were surprised by the level of work of some of the graduate students. Many graduate students were surprised that they could participate effectively in such a professional environment. The concept generated notable excitement among students and faculty in our COE. We expect the event to become an institutionalized means to foster research and creative activity; we hope the event will help maintain and deepen our academic climate.

Conclusion

Our purpose in presenting our experiences and perspectives has been to illustrate the benefit of in-house research exchanges in COEs. These events are valuable to the professional and scholarly development of graduate students because they provide an opportunity to conduct and present research in a "user-friendly" environment. Otherwise, the jump from coursework to regional or national conferences is simply too large. Behaviorists may call this phenomenon straining the reinforcement ratio; constructivists (from a Vygostkian perspective) may call it working outside the students' zone of proximal development. Regardless, many students may not recognize their potential without such a stepping-stone event.

We also propose that EREs have tremendous benefit to faculty who chose to authentically engage the mentoring process and facilitate their students' involvement in the ERE. Faculty participation in EREs brings legitimacy and professionalism to the event and is therefore necessary for students to maximally benefit from the experience. Mentorship can be an enriching and empowering experience for both student and faculty. We would hope that faculty would agree and support EREs, or initiate such an event, at their respective institutions. Furthermore, we present ourselves as willing to discuss our experiences with other persons seeking to initiate

ERE-like events at their institutions toward the goal of deepened research inquiry and development of future scholars.

Table 1

Summary of Support for Graduate Student Research in 15 Colleges of Education

University Responding	Survey Questions				
	Money for Travel	Presentation Required	In-House Conference	Keynote Speaker	Practice Element
University of Illinois – Urbana/Chamapaign	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
University of Nevada - Las Vegas	Y	N	Y	*	N
Auburn University	Y	N	Y	N	N
Penn State University	Y	N	Y	Y	N
Vanderbilt University	Y	N	Y	N	N
University of California - Los Angeles	Y	N	Y	Y	N
Iowa State University	Y	N	Y	Y	N
Louisiana State University	Y	N	Y	N	N
University of Wisconsin-Madison	Y	N	Y	N	Y
University of Alabama	Y	N	N		
University of California - Riverside	Y	N	N		
University of Connecticut	Y	N	N		
University of Minnesota	Y	N	N		
Texas Tech University	Y	N	N		
Frequencies	14	1	9	4	1

Note. Only those schools stating that they host in-house conferences were asked to answer the last two questions. An asterisk denotes a response other than yes or no (e.g., a comment).